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THE MODERN LIFE OF AN ANCIENT TEXT: THE *GOSPEL OF NICODEMUS* IN MANITOBA

Usually approached as an early Christian apocryphon, the Gospel of Nicodemus continues to resonate with the lives of many contemporary Christians as a source of religious inspiration and devotion. This paper investigates how and why a fourth-century apocryphal work found a following in rural Manitoba, where it was recently translated from German into English and disseminated in local Mennonite communities.

Habituellement considéré comme un apocryphe chrétien ancien, l'Évangile de Nicodème continue à avoir des résonances sur la vie de nombreux chrétiens contemporains comme source d'inspiration et de dévotion religieuse. Cet article étudie comment et pourquoi une œuvre apocryphe du IV^e siècle a trouvé une nouvelle jeunesse dans le Manitoba rural, où il a été naguère traduit de l'allemand en anglais, et où il a été disséminé dans les communautés mennonites locales.

The project of editing the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, whose early Christian versions are also known as the *Acts of Pilate*, grapples with countless historical, theological, linguistic, and palaeographic issues. It approaches the apocryphon as an ancient work that needs to be recovered from medieval manuscripts and understood against the background of its original historical milieu. What has received much less scholarly attention is the fact that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (GN) still resonates with the lives of many contemporary Christians in places such as Winkler, Manitoba (Canada). The ancient text at the heart of the editorial project has all along been very much a “living” text, not merely an object of academic interest or historical curiosity, but a source of religious inspiration and devotion. In the early 1990s, Helena Dueck, a resident of Winkler, translated the GN from German into English and published it locally in 1996. Her translation makes no claims to historical scholarship; rather, it was meant as an aid

in Christian devotion, piety, and perhaps even entertainment.¹ This paper investigates how and why a fourth-century apocryphal work found a following in rural Manitoba.

Originally composed in Greek in the fourth century, the *Acts of Pilate* – an apocryphon which in its expanded, Latin and vernacular versions is more commonly known as the *Gospel of Nicodemus* – began to spread in Western Christendom in the fifth. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was copied and read predominantly in Latin, although vernacular translations began to appear as early as the eleventh century (Old English, Slavonic) and by the end of the period were available in most European languages. However, since the diffusion and reach of individual manuscripts of those translations were limited, many vernaculars, such as English and German, produced several different translations, independent of one another, but all testifying to the keen, popular interest aroused by this apocryphon.² It was in the sixteenth century that, while the readership of the Latin *Evangelium Nicodemi* contracted and its popular printing ceased,³ vernacular translations finally came within reach of common, unilingual readers. Those translations were more eagerly embraced by those who espoused reformed Christianity than by Catholics. For, while the Catholic Church put the *GN* on the Index of forbidden books,⁴ many Protestants continued to be drawn to it for several reasons, some arising from pious curiosity that the pseudo-gospel gratified with a mix of awe-inspiring and comical details, and others relating to the apocryphon's relevance in the disputes over Christ's Descent into Hell. It is true that some, like Christopher Carlile at Cambridge University, denied the Descent and ridiculed the *Gospel of Nicodemus*,⁵ but others, and especially Continental Anabaptists, like Pilgrim Marpeck, cited it in support of

1. We interviewed Helena Dueck about her interest in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* in December 2009. All information relating to her family's interest in the apocryphon and to her own translation activities is based on that interview.

2. On European vernacular translations during the Middle Ages, see Z. IZYDORCZYK, ed. *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts in Western Europe* (Tempe, AZ, 1997).

3. The Latin text was last printed in a chapbook format by Vivantius Gaultherot in 1545 in Paris; afterwards, it was issued only in scholarly collections of early Christian documents intended for learned readers.

4. See J. M. BUJANDA, ed., *Index de l'Université de Louvain 1546, 1550, 1558* (Sherbrooke, Québec, 1986), p. 339-40.

5. Christopher CARLILE, *A Discovrse, Concerning two diuine Positions, The first effectually concluding, that the soules of the faithfull fathers, deceased before Christ, went immediately to heaven. The Second sufficientlye setting forth vnto vs Christians, what we are to cenceiue, touching the descension*

their literal conception of the Descent.⁶ The radical reformists were well disposed towards other Old and New Testament apocrypha as well, and both read and quoted such texts as the *Sybilline Oracles*, the *Testament of Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the Fourth letter of Clement.⁷ It is, therefore, not surprising that the *GN* should be brought to North America by radical reformists seeking religious freedom in the New World.

The *GN* made its first appearance in North America in a German version printed by Michael Müller at the religious community of Ephrata, Pennsylvania, in 1748, under the title *Die Beschreibung Des Evangeliums Nicodemi. Von dem Leyden unsers Herren Jesu Christi, Wie er von den Juden, als Ein Uebelthäter Zauberer, ect: vor Pilato fälschlich verklagt, und unschuldig zum Tod verurtheilt worden. Wie auch Von seiner Begräbnuss, Auferstechung u. Him[m]elfahrt ect. Welches beschrieben worden in dem dreysigsten Jahr des Kayserthums Tyberii*. According to a note at the end of the text (p. 80), the source of this edition was a text printed in Marburg in 1561 (by Andreas Kolb), which the editor corrected only slightly. This German version of the apocryphon was widely disseminated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in German-speaking regions of Europe. It was translated from the Latin text of the so-called Troyes redaction of the *Evangelium Nicodemi*, whose oldest manuscript dates back to the late twelfth century.⁸ Eighteen years after this North American *editio princeps*, in 1764, the Brotherhood at Ephrata printed the *GN* once again, but from a different German version and with a different title: *Des Jüngers Nicodemi Evangelium von unsers Meisters und Heylands Jesu Christi Leyden und Auferstehung*. This German translation appears to have been made from the Latin text published by Herold in his *Orthodoxographa* or one of its successors.⁹ In the meantime, Nicholas Hasselbach brought

of our Saviour Christ into hell: Publicly disputed at a Commencement in Cambridge, Anno Domini 1552... (London, 1582), fols. 52v-53r.

6. G. H. WILLIAMS, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed., Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 15 (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992), p. 1247.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1245-7.

8. See Z. IZYDORCZYK, "The Latin Source of an Old French Gospel of Nicodemus," *Revue d'histoire des textes* 25 (1995), 265-69, and the essay by Justin Haynes, earlier in this volume.

9. Johann BASILIUS HEROLD, ed., *Orthodoxographa theologiae sacrosanctae ac syncerioris fidei doctores numero LXXVI...* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1555). The exact source of the 1764 edition needs to be investigated further as essentially the same text was issued by Johann Jakob Grynaeus, ed., *Monumenta S. Patrum Orthodoxographa, hoc est, theologiae sacrosanctae ac syncerioris fidei Doctores, numero circiter LXXXV...*, vol. 2 (Basel: Heinrich

out his own German edition at Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, in 1763.¹⁰ He based it, according to the title page, on a copy printed in Tubingen in 1748. Hasselbach's version was considerably different from the first Ephrata edition. It was first printed, as far as we were able to determine, at Chemnitz in 1703 (afterwards reissued in Hamburg in 1713, and in Magdeburg in 1740),¹¹ but it is possible that it had some seventeenth-century antecedents. This German translation goes back to a Latin text, sometimes referred to as the Bohemian redaction of the *Evangelium Nicodemi*, preserved in several fifteenth-century manuscripts from Central Europe.¹² The same redaction had earlier provided a source-text for a German translation printed in Dantzick (now Gdansk, in Poland) by Franciscus Rhode in 1538,¹³ and for the Czech translations preserved in manuscripts¹⁴ and printed several times from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.¹⁵ The German *GN* printed by Hasselbach was thus a Central European vulgate version of the apocryphon. It formed part of a larger book, which included, besides the *GN*, a number of other apocryphal pieces, such as the letters of Pilate, Lentulus, and Abgar; stories about the childhood of Jesus; the *Vengeance of the Saviour* (*Vindicta Salvatoris*); and the *Testament of Twelve Patriarchs*. This collection must have appealed to the German speaking, religiously minded settlers in Pennsylvania.

Petri, 1569), and by Johannes Albertus FABRICIUS, ed., *Codex apocryphus Novi Testamenti* (Hamburgi: Sumptib. Benjam. Schiller., 1703).

10. *Evangelischer Bericht von dem Leben Jesu Christi welches Nicodemus, ein Rabbi und Oberster der Juden, beschrieben, wie er solches selbst gesehen und erfahren, weil er ein Nachfolger und heimlicher Jünger Jesu Christi gewesen; auch sind viel schöne Stücke und Geschichte dabey zu finden, welche Evangelisten nicht beschrieben haben* (Chestnut Hill, Pa., 1763).

11. There was also an Eisenberg imprint, without a date, and another in Magdeburg, also without a date but probably post-1740. For a list of those editions, see GOUNELLE and IZYDORCZYK, "Thematic Bibliography of the *Acts of Pilate*," in IZYDORCZYK, ed., *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus*, p. 451, 462-3.

12. For a brief description of this redaction and a list of its manuscripts, see Z. IZYDORCZYK, *The Gospel of Nicodemus Preserved in Poland*, CCSA Instrumenta 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), p. 18.

13. We consulted a copy at the Stadtbibliothek, Berlin (call no. 40 in Yd 7821: R). Title: *Das Euangelium des heiligen Nicodemy / welcker ys gewesen ein Furst der Juden / unde ein vorborgen Junger des Heren*.

14. V. Hanka, ed., "Čtenie Nikodemovo: co sě dalo při umučení páně," in *Abhandlungen der königlichen Böhmisches Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, Fünfte Folge, Eilster Band (Prague 1861), p. 225-56.

15. For a list of those editions, see the Knihopis Digital České prvotisky a stare tisky (1476-1800) on-line; a search on "Nikodemovo" yields fifteen different editions; see the results at <http://db.knihopis.org> (accessed Oct. 26, 2010).

It was re-issued in 1784 and 1791 by Jacob Bailey in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; in 1796 by Johann Gruber in Hagerstaun, Maryland; in 1819 by J. S. Wiesling in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and twice by C. A. Bruckamn in Reading, Pennsylvania; in 1830 and 1843 by Johann Bär in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and without date by Schäfer & Koradi in Philadelphia.¹⁶ As was usual, printers took some liberties with the selection and arrangement of the material, but the text of the *GN* remained essentially unchanged.

Many, if not most, readers of those books were German-speaking Anabaptists settled in various Mennonite, Amish, and Hutterite communities. The popularity of New Testament apocrypha among the Mennonites is attested by Robert Friedman, who mentions the Ephrata editions of the *GN* at the Goshen College Library, Indiana.¹⁷ Copies of various editions derived from Hasselbach's collection can today be found, for example, at various Mennonite benefit auctions, such as the ones organized by the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society.¹⁸ That same collection, including the *GN*, was reprinted in German by Joe E. Schwartz as late as 1966, and it is still available on demand, in the original German Gothic type, from the Amish bookstore in Baltic, Ohio (Raber's Book Store).¹⁹

Helena Dueck's English translation of a portion of this German collection testifies to the continued interest, perhaps even fascination, of North American Anabaptists with the New Testament apocrypha. She based her translation on Schwartz's edition printed by Economy Printing Concern, in Berne, Indiana. Most of the works contained in the source collection were, of course, available in English translation in various, more or less accessible, academic publications. However, Helena Dueck chose to stay close to her Mennonite roots and reading tradition, and drew her text from a book sanctioned by generations of Anabaptist readers.²⁰

16. For a list of those editions, see GOUNELLE and IZYDORCZYK, "Thematic Bibliography," p. 462-63 (the list does not include the Schäfer & Koradi printing).

17. Robert FRIEDMAN, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries: Its Genius and Its Literature* (Goshen, Ind., 1949), p. 221-22.

18. An 1843 copy was sold at the 2003 auction, lot no. 108; see <http://www.lmhistorical.mennonite.net> (accessed Aug. 18, 2010). Another copy was sold in 2009; see <http://www.lmhs.org> (accessed Aug. 18, 2010).

19. On the Amish attraction to spurious books, see J. A. HOSTETLER, *Amish Society*, 4th ed. (Baltimore and London, 1993), p. 341.

20. Some fifty years earlier, another Canadian Mennonite proposed to translate the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, presumably also from German, but it is not clear what, if anything, came out of his project. See FRIEDMAN, *Mennonite Piety*, p. 222.

The *GN* first entered Helena Dueck's life when her father, very fond of books, especially those touching on Christianity, ordered Schwartz's edition advertised in a local Mennonite newspaper in Steinbach, Manitoba. Helena Dueck recalls that her father used to read aloud passages from the *GN* and from other, similar books. After his death, Helena's mother kept the books, including the *GN*, in the family, and it is she who passed the book on to Helena. Whether other members of her community read similar books, Helena is not sure, but the *Gospel of Nicodemus* was certainly highly regarded and respected in her own family.

Although she had heard passages from the apocryphon read by her father, Helena Dueck did not have an opportunity to read it herself until many years later, when household and family responsibilities became less pressing. The experience of reading her father's copy of the apocryphal collection convinced her that the book had a lasting Christian value. She was fascinated by the *GN* and the stories of Jesus' childhood. In addition, the *GN* struck her as entirely trustworthy. She was attracted to its air of authenticity, created by the persona of Nicodemus who "came to Jesus by night," as John 3:1-2 testifies. Helena is, of course, intimately familiar with the Bible, which she reads daily, and that familiarity allowed her to see Nicodemus's account of Jesus as reliable and worthwhile.

The stories she found in her father's German collection strongly resonated with her, and they quickly became a central focus in her life. She wished to share them with others, particularly with young people, who she firmly believed would benefit from reading such a book. She was aware, however, that today, very few youth could read German. Like many of her own generation, Helena Dueck is bilingual in German and English. Her mother spoke only German, and the rest of her family used both languages. With proficiency in both languages and her desire to bring the *GN* and the childhood stories of Jesus to the youth of her community, Helena embarked upon translating them in the late 1980s. She saw her translation project as a form of missionary work: she could not, like her daughter, travel abroad, but she could contribute to the collective good of her community by translating wholesome, even inspiring reading material that could, in her own words, draw her and other readers "closer to the Lord."

This translation project took Helena Dueck several years to complete. She spent the first year rendering the text into English, scrupulously writing everything down by hand. It is important to note that Helena did not translate the entire source collection but only the stories that she found most appealing, namely those pertaining to Jesus. She assumed that many pieces, especially those more obscure and not directly related to the person of Jesus, would not appeal to

her young audience, so she omitted them in her translation. After a few years of typing and revising, the book entitled *The Life Story of Jesus Christ by Nicodemus* was ready. At her own expense, Helena had Country Graphics and Printing in Rosenort, Manitoba, print 400 copies. Her intention was to distribute the books, free of charge, throughout the community. She gave copies to her family, friends, and acquaintances, and donated several copies to the Bible Book Shop in Winkler. While no copies of the book can be found at the local Winkler library, one can be located at the Canadian Mennonite University Library in Winnipeg. By December 2009, most copies had been distributed.

As it turns out, Helena Dueck unknowingly played a key role in keeping the *Gospel of Nicodemus* “alive and well” in a small Canadian prairie town. However, this kind of grass roots interest in and promotion of the *GN* and other apocrypha about Jesus is not a uniquely North American phenomenon. A century and a half earlier, Jan Bądzio, a Protestant bibliophile-farmer from Małe Szczeczy, a village in the Masuria region (now north-eastern Poland), translated the *GN*, together with a handful of other apocryphal pieces, from a large German book into Polish, so that Polish country-folk could read it for the glory of God.²¹ Two years later, inspired by the success of Bądzio’s little book, another bibliophile-farmer from the same region, Wilhelm Michalczyk, retranslated and expanded that collection with the help of a German book he had happened to purchase.²² Both Bądzio’s and Michalczyk’s texts of the Polish *GN* are based on German versions of the Bohemian redaction – the same used by Helena Dueck – but Michalczyk’s is so close to Dueck’s English version that his German source must have been identical with the one Dueck used. Michalczyk’s collection went through no fewer than eleven editions between 1854 and 1904.²³

21. Jan BĄDZIO, ed., *Czytania nabożne ku chwale Boga. Książka dla ludu* (Druk A. Gąsiorowskiego w Jansborku, 1852). On Bądzio, see Tadeusz ORACKI, *Słownik biograficzny Warmii, Mazur i Powiśla XIX i XX wieku (do 1945 roku)* (Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, 1983), p. 18.

22. We have consulted the sixth edition: Wylhelm MICHALCZYK, ed., *Ewangelia Nikodema czyli krótka wiadomość o żywocie Odkupiciela naszego Pana Jezusa Chrystusa którą napisał Nikodem, Książę Żydowski, jak on sam był widział i doświadczył, gdyż był nietylko Rabinem i nauczycielem Żydowskim, ale oraz teimnym uczniem Jezusowym...* (Ostróda: C. E. Salewski, [1877]). On Michalczyk, see ORACKI, *Słownik biograficzny*, p. 214-15.

23. For a list of those editions, see Władysław CHOJNACKI, *Bibliografia polskich druków ewangelickich Ziemi Zachodnich i Północnych 1530-1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Zwiastun,” 1966), nos. 558*-567* and 1806.

Even today, Helena Dueck is probably not the only facilitator providing lifeblood to this ancient apocryphon. While not in the mainstream of contemporary Christianity, the *GN* continues to stir interest, inspire, and spark the imagination; it continues as a living text. The spectrum of readers it attracts is very wide, from Mennonites to prophets of alien invasions.²⁴ And it has a surprisingly healthy presence on the Internet, where one can easily access it in English as well as most modern languages. The on-line texts in English are derived from various out-of-print, often nineteenth-century editions, such as those by Charles F. Horne²⁵ and William Wake,²⁶ whose modern reprints are also available for purchase at Amazon.com. At lulu.com, a website devoted to helping authors self-publish, users can also download an electronic version of the *Gospel of Nicodemus Formerly Called the Acts of Pontius Pilate* for only \$1.99 US to be read using a Kindle or an iPad. Remarkably, this ancient text is adapting very well to new electronic technologies.

Thus it can be safely said that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* persists as a living text, responding and adjusting not only to fluctuations in academic and non-academic interests but to advances in mass communication technologies as well. Just as Helena Dueck adapted her English translation to attract local Winkler youth to the stories of Jesus, so does the e-book format allow easy integration of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* into the fast-paced reality of today. Moreover, websites such as lulu.com and Amazon's createspace.com, permit for the rapid and widespread dissemination and sharing of the apocryphon, bringing it to new audiences and new causes. Customer responses documented online at Amazon.com leave no doubt that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* continues to draw and impact many people and communities as a religious resource and often as a source of inspiration.

24. Cf. the sermon preached at the Ottawa Mennonite Church in 2008, available at <http://www.ottawamennonite.ca/sermons/civility.htm> (accessed Sept. 16, 2010), and Sherry Shriner's unusual reading of it at http://sherryshriner.com/books/gospel_of_nicodemus.htm (accessed Sept. 16, 2010).

25. *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East*, vol. 14, *The Great Rejected Books of the Biblical Apocrypha* (New York and London: Parke, Austin, and Lipscomb, 1917), p. 325-88.

26. The text attributed to Wake is probably derived from W. HONE, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament; Being all the Gospels, Epistles, and Other Pieces Now Extant; Attributed in the First Four Centuries to Jesus Christ, His Apostles, and Their Companions, and not Included in the New Testament by Its Compilers....* (London: W. Hone), 1820.